Art Controversy in the Obama White House: Performing Tensions of Race in the Visual Politics of the Presidency

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In 2009, two works by African American artists selected for display in the White House produced controversy among critics of the president. Our analysis explores how media discussion involving a Charles Alston bust of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and an abstract painting by Alma Thomas unearthed cultural tensions involving the practice of imitation, the value of presence, and the role of Black art and artists. Such tensions shaped the debate about the art works chosen by the Obamas and raised the question of how to define and place a Black president in the first year of his first term.

While presidents historically have used a variety of visual forms to communicate their beliefs, attitudes, values, and policies, one mode of visual rhetoric that has yet to be examined substantively by rhetorical scholars of the presidency is that of fine art. This is surprising because there is ample evidence that contemporary presidents use White House art as a mode of rhetoric (Finnegan 2014). Art functions as one of the screens upon which presidents communicate ideas about themselves and what they value. In this article, we demonstrate the value of attention to presidents' relationships to art by exploring two instances in 2009 when art by twentieth-century African American artists selected for public display in the Obama White House produced controversy. In the first case we examine, a 1970 bronze bust by Charles Alston of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was falsely argued to have "replaced" one of Winston Churchill in Obama's Oval Office, angering those who claimed that Obama had "thrown Churchill out" and therefore

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potentially damaged the nation's "special relationship" with Britain. In the second case, a 1963 abstract painting by Alma Thomas, *Watusi (Hard Edge)*, was attacked by right-wing bloggers as "plagiarism," and Thomas's art branded as inferior, because of the work's visual resemblance to a piece by Henri Matisse. Both controversies emerged during the first year of Obama's presidency as the new president sought to establish his authority, and American citizens eagerly sought to learn more about the political and aesthetic style of the newest occupants of the White House.

The controversies could easily be dismissed as media frenzies whipped up by partisans looking for any reason to ridicule the new president. Yet to do so would be rash, for there is value in taking them seriously. Controversy, as Olson and Goodnight have argued, has the potential to "disrupt the taken-for-granted realm of the uncontested and commonplace," thus making explicit assumptions about the world which are often only implicit (1994, 250). In this article, we illustrate how the Obamas' choices about art, and the controversies that followed, constitute rhetorical statements about art, race, and politics that are worth investigating. Both Alston and Thomas were twentieth-century African Americans who achieved wide public recognition for their work in a time of deep division and ongoing racial unrest in the United States. They both trained as teachers at Columbia University (coincidentally, President Obama's alma mater), and though each pursued a different style—Alston's was more representational, Thomas's abstract—both publicly eschewed being pigeonholed as "Black artists." It is understandable why these artists working in the mid-twentieth century would resist the "Black artist" label, which could be used not only to marginalize their work in the art community, but also to limit their economic opportunities.

By contrast, as the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama would appear to have the power and opportunity to place cultural contributions by African Americans in a prominent place on the public screen. Indeed, despite critiques that President Obama largely has ignored issues of race, the Obamas consistently have used the rich canvas of the White House to perform the value of diversifying Americans' ideas about what constitutes "American" art, politics, and history. Yet this interest in increasing the visibility of diverse cultural productions has left the Obamas vulnerable to the kinds of critiques we explore in this article. Taking such critiques seriously reveals the extent to which the nation's first African American president, especially in his first year, was challenged in his attempts to publicly value Black aesthetic experience. Indeed, the art controversies involving the Alston bust and the Thomas painting unearthed deep cultural tensions about art and race. These tensions, involving the role of imitation, the ways we place Black artists and their art, and the value of presence, shaped the debate about the art works chosen by the Obamas and ultimately, we conclude, visualized anxieties about Obama himself.

Our article is organized in the following manner. First, we explore the question of how Obama has dealt with issues of race, especially early in his first term. Next, we examine the role of visual rhetoric in scholarship on the presidency and briefly describe the history and functions of art in the White House. We then go on to describe each controversy in detail, outlining the major arguments that circulated in the mainstream media and among right-wing bloggers and commentators. Next, we show how these

arguments reflect perennial tensions surrounding Black experience and aesthetic expression, from the question of imitation to the role of Black art to the fraught nature of presence. Finally, we return to President Obama himself to explore how such tensions played out for a president who has been critiqued for not "talking about race" but whose visual aesthetics consistently have invited attention to the important role of Black art and expression in the American story.

Obama and Race

Throughout his presidency, but especially in his first term, President Obama has faced criticisms that he ignores issues of race, specifically with regard to Black Americans.[1] Even some who argue that they are his most ardent supporters believe that he has not done enough to improve the quality of life for African Americans. Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, two of Obama's most outspoken and controversial critics, see the president as mostly silent on issues of importance to African Americans and communities that struggle with poverty (Baker 2013; Kantor 2012). In 2010, Michael Eric Dyson urged the president "to stand up and use his bully pulpit to help us. He is loath to speak about race" (Gane-McCalla 2010). Yet others contend these critics are wrong to suggest that the president should behave as a leader of a social movement would. Responding to Dyson's critique, Melissa Harris-Parry (2010) argued, "Barack Obama is not the leader of a progressive social movement; he is the president. As president he is both more powerful than Dr. King and more structurally constrained. He has more institutional power at his disposal and more crosscutting constituencies demanding his attention." Ultimately, President Obama is seen as having to keep in precarious balance his commitments to all citizens as president and his desire to connect with Black communities. As the *New York Times*' Jodi Kantor put it in a 2012 profile, "Mr. Obama is balancing two deeply held impulses: a belief in universal politics not based on race and an embrace of black life and its challenges."

One place where President and Mrs. Obama consistently engaged race and arguably used their "bully pulpit" during the first term is in the area of visual rhetoric. In January of 2010, for example, a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln was put on permanent display in the Oval Office. The document, which appears regularly in photographs made of the president in the Oval Office by White House photographer Pete Souza, serves as a powerful visual reminder not only of U.S. racial history and Obama's unique role in it, but also of the president's recognition of the complexities of moral governance (Finnegan 2014). The Obamas have also used White House performance events to highlight the diversity of American aesthetic expression, offering, for example, concerts in genres such as gospel, folk-rock, classical, and contemporary rhythm and blues, and celebrating the achievements of African Americans at such events (Jones 2010; White House 2012). From the visual arts perspective, some argue

1. Notable exceptions include Obama's comments and the subsequent "beer summit" after scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was arrested in his own home in 2009 and Obama's responses to the Trayvon Martin shooting and verdict in 2012-13.

that a "cultural revolution" has taken place in the White House, where the Obamas have introduced more modern and abstract pieces, some of which reflect racially and ethnically diverse art practices. While previous presidents may have included modern art in their private quarters, the modern pieces that the Obamas selected have extended into public spaces like the East and West Wings of the White House (Akbar 2009; Benac 2009; Vogel 2009). Finally, the Obama administration has also used art in the White House to call attention to issues of civil rights history. For example, during the summer of 2011 Norman Rockwell's 1963 painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, was installed in a reception area just outside of the Oval Office. The painting depicts schoolgirl Ruby Bridges' integration of her elementary school in New Orleans in 1960; it was hung after Bridges herself and members of Congress lobbied the White House (White House 2011). While some critics of President Obama may contend that these sorts of representations of race during the first term were not sufficient to counter arguments that the president ignores issues affecting Black communities, our analysis below shows that issues of race nevertheless were very much present in the visual rhetoric of the Obama White House and in the controversies it sparked.

Visual Rhetoric, the Presidency, and White House Art

The media of television, film, the "photo op" and now the Internet figure regularly in discussions of the visual politics of the presidency (Adatto 2008; Edwards 1997; Erickson 2000; Hart 1989, 1994; Jamieson, 1990, 1996; Mullen 1997; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002, 2006; Ponder 2000; Rollins and O'Connor 2003; Sheeler and Anderson 2013; Streitmatter 1988). Yet with few exceptions, the role of fine art has been ignored (exceptions include Bumgardner 1986; Finnegan 2014; Greenhalgh 2007; Olson 1983; Ward 2004). Such neglect is unfortunate, because art matters to presidents. In 1814, First Lady Dolley Madison, scrambling to bring the household to safety, instructed White House servants to save a portrait of George Washington from British flames (Bolger and Curry 2008, 23; Goldberg 2011, 24; Kloss 2008, 66-67). In 1962, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy retold this mythic story in a televised White House tour designed to publicize her efforts to reclaim the White House as a museum of the presidency (Caudle 2009; Sidey 2003). More recently, President George W. Bush's well-documented love for a western-themed painting culminated not only in its display in the Oval Office, but its inclusion in his own painted White House portrait (Finnegan 2010; Landler 2012). Throughout U.S. history, but especially in the last 50 years, the White House has served not only as a museum for American art; it has also provided presidents with vital rhetorical resources for navigating the political landscape. Presidents use White House art to associate themselves with American values and traditions, authorize their leadership, and even communicate policy goals (Finnegan 2014). Paying attention to the multiple ways that presidents use fine art in the White House provides valuable insight into the aesthetic and cultural resources available to presidents seeking to tell their own versions of the national story.

The White House itself enables and constrains how presidents use art to shape that story. According to Forrest McDonald, "The president lives in a museum of the history of the presidency" (1995, 466). Frustrated with how little history remained in the White House, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy consulted with historians, archivists, and scholars for guidance on renovating the building and recovering or acquiring period items belonging to its past residents (Bushong 2003, 50; Sidey 2003). At the same time, the Kennedy administration advocated for institutional frameworks to guide future changes to the White House and additions to its collection. The nonprofit White House Historical Association (WHHA) was chartered on November 3, 1961 to "enhance understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of the Executive Mansion." Today, among other duties, the WHHA oversees the collection of objects in the White House, establishes rules for their display, and is responsible for acquiring pieces for the White House art collection. Since the Kennedy administration, presidents are allowed to decorate the living quarters and their private office spaces (such as the Oval Office) with any works of art they wish. Presidents usually mix pieces borrowed from the White House's permanent collection with loans from other museums or private collections. No changes may be made to the building's state rooms, however, without approval of the White House curator (Chozick and Crow 2009).

White House art functions as an epideictic rhetoric that presidents deploy to link themselves to American values and traditions and to highlight elements of the national story with which they want to identify themselves (Finnegan 2014). In spending time and energy on identifying works of art to hang in the public and private spaces of the White House, the Obamas were no different from other recent occupants. Yet their choices received intense public scrutiny. In May 2009, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Obamas were "sending ripples through the art world as they put the call out to museums, galleries and private collectors that they'd like to borrow modern art by African-American, Asian, Hispanic and female artists for the White House" (Chozick and Crow 2009). In October of that year, the White House released the final list of the Obamas' selections, in all 45 pieces of art work that included a diverse group of themes, artists, and genres. Media outlets pointed out that the selections constituted a bold departure from previous administrations. David Ross, the former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was quoted in the London *Times* as saying that their selections reflected a "high level of taste and discernment" and "[confirmed] their reputation for stylishness and modernity" (Baxter and Ruiz 2009, 25). Newspapers, magazines, television news shows, and blogs commented on the selections at length, noting the Obamas' seeming preference for modern and contemporary art, reflecting upon their choices of art by women and African American artists, and even putting the president under psychological scrutiny as they wondered whether the Obamas' choice of Ed Ruscha's *I Think I'll . . .* was indicative of the president's problem of "lengthy bouts of contemplation" (Chozick and Crow, 2009, 30).

Art not only mattered to the president, but to his constituents as well. As we shall see in the rest of this article, however, a few of the art works chosen by the Obamas for display in the White House caused Obama's critics to raise the alarm about his visual rhetoric. The first case we examine, involving an Oval Office bust of Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr., by Charles Alston, took place early in 2009 and continued well into the 2012 election year. The second case emerged in the fall of 2009 as part of the debate described above, when a painting by Alma Thomas was borrowed from the Hirschhorn Museum for display in First Lady Michelle Obama's East Wing office of the White House. It may be tempting to dismiss the controversies over these works of art as mere examples of the superficial cultural dramas of a hypermediated age. Yet if we read these instances of partisan division in the broader context of the visual politics of the presidency, then the art controversies become an invitation to think critically about the ways that art and race operated in and around the early months of the Obama presidency.

"Replacing" Churchill with King

In the weeks following Obama's first inauguration, the UK's *Daily Telegraph* reported that a bust of Winston Churchill loaned by the British government to the Bush White House in 2001 "has now been formally handed back" and, according to the British Embassy, had been newly installed in the British ambassador's residence in Washington, DC (Shipman 2009). Noting that the White House had been offered the option of extending the loan, the paper reported that the "rejection of the bust has left some British officials nervously reading the runes to see how much influence the UK can wield with the new regime in Washington" (Shipman 2009). Observing that the new American president was fonder of quoting Lincoln than Churchill, the article noted that a bust of Lincoln now sat where the Churchill bust had been.

Just weeks later, in March 2009, ABC News White House reporter Jake Tapper reported that President Obama had, "with no fanfare or media attention," added a bronze bust of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to the Oval Office to "put his historic stamp on the presidency." Tapper then told a brief history of the King bust. Produced by African American artist Charles Alston in 1970, the bust was acquired a few years later by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. In 2000, the Clinton White House elected to borrow the bust and place it in the White House library, marking, "believe it or not," Tapper exclaimed, "the first time that the image of an African American was displayed in a public space in the White House" (Tapper 2009). Noting that the Alston bust of King had been placed "adjacent a bust of Abraham Lincoln," Tapper added that the Lincoln bust now occupied the space where a bust of Winston Churchill had most recently sat. Tapper said that the Churchill bust had been returned to the British "before Mr. Obama's inauguration" (Tapper 2009).

Shortly thereafter, the media narrative seemed to echo the *Daily Telegraph*'s take. The next day, NBC News Washington repeated the essentials of Tapper's story, including that the bust had been returned to Great Britain before President Obama took office. But it subtitled its piece, "See ya, Churchill" (Iovino 2009), which echoed the *Telegraph*'s earlier claims of the "rejection" of Churchill and further gave the impression that the bust had been exchanged for Alston's bust of King. By the following week, the narrative had shifted even further still as others openly stated that Churchill had been "replaced by" King—not Lincoln, as earlier stories had reported (Greenbaum 2009).

Between 2010 and 2012, the story of the "replaced" bust circulated repeatedly. Despite claims that the bust was removed before the Obama inauguration and the White House curator's later explicit confirmation of that fact, both U.S. and UK media and right-wing commentators repeated the Obama-rejects-Churchill narrative (*CBS News*/*AP* 2010). In June 2010, Glenn Beck dove into the fray, speculating on his television show that the bust was sent back because Obama held "animosity towards the British," which supposedly derived from the experience of his paternal grandfather who had been tortured by colonial powers in Kenya in the 1950s (Gertz 2010). Former presidential candidate and Fox News commentator Mike Huckabee also offered a version of the Kenya narrative again in 2011 and described the so-called return of the bust as "a great insult to the British." Simon Malloy of Media Matters noted further that the "Kenyan grandfather" theory was also repeated in at least one regular news segment, where a British Fox News commentator said that in fact Obama's "first act" in office was to "send back" the bust of Churchill and stated that the reason was "because President Obama's father disliked the colonial administration in his native Kenya" (Malloy 2011).

As the 2012 presidential campaign heated up, Republican nominee Mitt Romney and his advisors explicitly raised the issue of the Churchill bust when Romney visited Great Britain that summer. The UK's *Daily Telegraph* reported that Mitt Romney's advisors told the paper that Romney would "restore 'Anglo-Saxon' understanding to the special relationship between the US and Great Britain" and "would seek to reinstate the Churchill bust displayed in the Oval Office by George W. Bush but returned to British diplomats by Mr. Obama when he took office in 2009" (Swain 2012). One advisor "said Mr. Romney viewed the move as 'symbolically important' while the other said it was 'just for starters,' adding 'He [Romney] is naturally more Atlanticist'" (Swain 2012). According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Romney himself reportedly told donors at a London fund-raiser, "It tugs at the heart strings to remember the kind of example" that Churchill set, Mr. Romney said, "and I'm looking forward to the bust of Winston Churchill being in the Oval Office again" (Murray 2012). That same month, writing on Romney's trip abroad, conservative political columnist Charles Krauthammer repeated the claim that the "first act" of Obama's presidency was to return the Churchill bust (Krauthammer 2012).[2]

While Beck, Huckabee, Romney, and Krauthammer do not appear to have mentioned the King bust at all (a point we discuss further below), the specific narrative that King had replaced Churchill persisted in the media. In late 2010, for example, when the Obama White House released photographs of the newly redesigned Oval Office, London's *Mail* titled its story on the redecorated space, "Churchill out, Martin Luther King in" (Mail Foreign Service 2010). In the story, photos of each bust were placed side by side and captioned, "New addition: This bust of Martin Luther King has been added to the Oval

2. This time the White House directly responded, but in doing so introduced more confusion into the situation. White House Communications Director Dan Pfeiffer repeated earlier assertions that the bust had been returned before Obama took office. But he also introduced an error into the narrative by claiming that the bust was still in the White House, just not in the Oval Office; this claim turned out to be false. Apparently there were in fact *two* busts of Churchill, the one loaned by Britain and returned before Obama took office, and another received by Presisdent Lyndon Johnson from the British and part of the White House's collection. The latter bust is still in the White House (see Benen 2012; Tapper 2009).

Office, but there's no place for Winston Churchill." Seemingly unaware that the King bust by Charles Alston had been in the Oval Office for 18 months already, the article asserted, "The bronze bust of Winston Churchill that adorned the room during George Bush's tenure is long gone, replaced by one of Martin Luther King" (Mail Foreign Service 2010).

One way to read this controversy is to suggest that the "Churchill replaced King" narrative was a trumped-up controversy designed primarily to offer conservative critics of President Obama inventional resources to criticize his foreign policy and remind audiences of Obama's seemingly "un-American" (and even un-"Atlanticist") family background. Yet two things about this controversy are of interest to us here. First, although initial media reports about the return of the Churchill bust emphasized (and White House photos made in the Oval Office appear to confirm) that a bust of *Lincoln* now physically occupied the space where the Churchill bust had been, almost overnight that narrative shifted to one that emphasized the replacement of the Churchill bust by the bust of *King*. If King was added to the Oval Office, the narrative seemed to say, then something necessarily had to be taken away, and that something was Churchill. Why did the narrative persist that it was King? And why was it apparently perceived that there was a sort of magic number or limit to the number of such art works that could occupy the space? We have no way of knowing for sure, but we will explore the rhetorical work that the "Churchill out/King in" narrative might be doing for those critical of the president. Second, with very few exceptions (Long 2012; Tapper 2009), the public conversation about the King bust's arrival in the Oval Office focused not on the president's choice to display an image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Oval Office, or on the late artist Charles Alston's achievements in creating a pioneering art object that constituted the first image of a Black American in the White House, but on the absent presence of Winston Churchill. Indeed, while Churchill is physically absent from the Oval Office, he is symbolically present everywhere else in the discourse. At the same time, King and Alston—the artist who rendered so skillfully King's image—are absent almost entirely. The story became not about the addition of King to the Oval Office but the removal of something else. Because media focused primarily on the importance of Churchill to the United States and critics avoided talking about the importance of having a bust of King in the Oval Office, both Alston the artist and King the icon were symbolically erased by the media discourse. If Churchill is an absent presence, then, King and Alston both are present absences: there in the space, but unacknowledged and unrecognized. As we shall elaborate later in this article, the elevation of Churchill and erasure of both Alston and King's bust opens up interesting questions about privilege, presence, and absence, and points to the complex epideictic functions of White House art, especially in the context of race.

Alma Thomas and *Watusi (Hard Edge)*

The list of art works chosen for display in the Obama White House leaned heavily toward the kind of modernist works not typically featured in the permanent White

House collection and included two paintings by the late African American artist Alma Thomas: *Sky Light* (1973), which would hang in the private residence, and *Watusi (Hard Edge)* (1963), slated for a wall in Michelle Obama's East Wing office. Of all the works the Obamas selected for display, *New York Times* art critic Holland Carter singled out Alma Thomas's work, saying that her paintings were the only ones the Obamas had selected that he would choose to display in his own home. Praising Thomas's skill in abstraction, he called her "forward-looking without being radical; post-racial but also race-conscious; in love with new, in touch with old" (Carter 2009). Political critics of the president, however, soon seized upon the selection of *Watusi (Hard Edge)* in particular. Noting similarities in style and composition between Thomas's acrylic painting and one of Henri Matisse's late-career paper cutouts, they argued that Thomas was a "rip-off artist" who lacked talent and originality and had blatantly plagiarized the work of a famous, important artist.

Furthermore, that the Obamas had chosen such a "fraudulent" painting was for these critics reflective of the Obamas' lack of artistic knowledge and intellect and also indicated their supposed preferences for racial identity over artistic skill. In an October 8, 2009, blog post, right-wing commentator Michelle Malkin built on an observation from a blogger at FreeRepublic.com, who had noticed that the work bore a striking resemblance to a 1953 work by Henri Matisse called *L'Escargot (The Snail)*. That blogger admonished the Obamas' selection of the painting, asking "Is this fraud? If the new piece has been titled 'Homage to Collage' or 'Matisse in Blue', I would think the artist wasn't trying to hide the copying." The post continued, "But I wonder whether anyone realized that the artist copied almost every aspect of a famous work to sell her artwork" (*FreeRepublic* 2009). For her part, quoting from and then dismissing an explanation of the origin of the piece from *Art in America* magazine (that Thomas's acrylic painting combined her aesthetic interests in nature and African culture with a purposeful stylistic homage to Matisse's famous paper cutouts), Michelle Malkin jokingly turned an image of the *Mona Lisa* on its side, claimed it as her own new work, and titled it *Twist* (Malkin 2009). Suggestions (like that by *Art in America*) that Thomas had engaged in a legitimate appropriation with aesthetic value were dismissed as out of hand. One blogger, for example, stated, "Can anyone say plagiarism? American art? I don't think so!" (*Back of the Canvas* 2009).

In addition to denigrating the art work as a bad copy or imitation of a master (the subtitle of Malkin's original post was "Art, Imitation, and the Obamas"), critics hinted that the appropriation was blatantly obvious: "Perhaps everyone involved knew that this is a re-colored reprint. If not, it seems to be an embarrassment for the 'sophisticates' who failed to spot a copy hiding in plain sight" (*FreeRepublic* 2009). As another blogger put it more succinctly, "How could no one notice this?" (Davidson 2009). If a viewer failed to recognize the similarities, then, the viewer should be embarrassed to lack knowledge or sophistication. By extension, if the Obamas had selected Thomas's painting for display in the White House, they too must have been ignorant, unsophisticated dupes.

A third theme emerged in the critiques of Thomas's painting, one that is a bit at odds with the first two: a critique of the style of the art itself, the familiar critique of

abstract expressionism that it is not a difficult artistic style to replicate or, as several commentators put it, "'Even I could have done THAT!'" (*FreeRepublic* 2009). Some commenting on Thomas's painting made similar statements, claiming that the work was "like your three-year-old's recent construction paper cut-out from pre-school—the one she made with the rounded scissors" (Shapiro 2009) and stating, "My son did something like this in kindergarten" (Davidson 2009). Somewhat incoherently, this critique was woven into criticism of Thomas as having stolen the work of Matisse. Thus Thomas was both denigrated for having stolen the work of a European master so skillfully that even the top museums of the world did not notice, and at the same time both Thomas and the very same European master were lambasted for apparently creating work any child could have done. Critics, it seemed, wanted to have it both ways.

Finally, Thomas's race figured into the discourse in more or less explicit ways. Several bloggers took care to identify Thomas as a "black painter," and several stated explicitly that the only plausible reason the Obamas might have chosen such an inferior/fraudulent work of art was because Thomas was Black, not that she was talented. Blogger Ben Shapiro, for example, wrote, "It's as though the Obamas decided to do a poll as to what Americans would least like to post in their living rooms, then adopted all the top choices, with special credit to black artists based on their race" (Shapiro 2009). Blogger Ann Althouse titled her post on the Thomas painting "The Obamas selected a work of art that's an outright copy of Matisse—done by an African American woman" and wrote, "It's really sad to see this sentimental stretching to identify African-American artists. There are plenty of *real* ones, and mistakes like this make it seem as though there are not and that patronizing—which really ought to be called *racism*—is necessary" (Althouse 2009).

Defenders of both Thomas and the White House's choice of her paintings emerged just as quickly. They emphasized that imitation, appropriation, and mimesis stand at the cornerstone of all aesthetic practice, and explained that Thomas's work had long been collected and respected; indeed, the two paintings borrowed by the Obamas were lent by the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, DC. As one commenter on the Media Matters site put it, "What's really so kooky about this is, taken in context, Malkin . . . just took the entire history of Western art, including the Greeks, to task for mimicry. Art has never been about originality. . . . Artists mimic and mock and defile the works that precede them. That's what they do" (Holden 2009). Blogger Greg Allen authored a detailed thematic analysis of criticisms of Thomas as posted in the comments section of FreeRepublic.com. Of the specific criticism of plagiarism, he wrote, "It's a false and defamatory claim, and the real story of Thomas and Matisse is deeply fascinating and diametrically opposed to the spiteful, divisive worldview in which it originated" (Allen 2009). Liz Hager of the visual arts collective blog Venetian Red pointed out earlier images, such as a 1916-17 collage by Jean Arp, that share strong similarities with Matisse's cutouts. She added, "Thomas always credited Matisse for the inspiration that produced Watusi. It is obvious that the work launched her on a journey of artistic discovery that produced her unique and forward-looking (if not radical) mosaic style" (Hager 2009). Media Matters' Jeremy Holden cited Ann Gibson, an art historian familiar with Thomas' work and especially with *Watusi*, to bolster his claim that critics did not

understand modernism or the intentions behind Thomas's appropriation of Matisse's work. Gibson wrote, "[w]hen Thomas's mimicry and revision of Matisse is read in the context of her entitling her painting *Watusi* [after a record made famous by Chubby Checker], one sees more than an implicit defiance of modernism's creed of originality" (Holden 2009). Holden contended that the conservatives' argument that Thomas copied Matisse was too simple of an explanation. They failed to consider that perhaps Thomas's goal was to exploit the genre as not original. Further, Holden also took critics to task for not also considering the context of the time period—the civil rights era—as a way to understand why Thomas might have created the revisionist piece. Rather than see that *Watusi* was an obvious copy done in homage to Matisse, perhaps to challenge the myth that European artwork was original and unable to be replicated, critics excoriated Thomas as lacking the aptitude to be seen as a real artist.

About one month after public discussion of Thomas's painting erupted, Randy Kennedy of the *New York Times* "Art Beat" blog reported that "the White House has quietly de-listed a painting by Alma W. Thomas that it chose last month" (Kennedy 2009). Pressed for an explanation of why *Watusi (Hard Edge)* was returned to the Hirschhorn, Semonti Stephens, a deputy press secretary for the first lady, "said that the painting had been intended to go in the first lady's office and that the decision not to put it there was made only because its dimensions did not work in the space in which it was to hang." The painting (which is about 48 inches square), " 'just didn't fit right in the room'," Stephens said (Kennedy 2009). It was noted in the *Washington Post* that the Obamas still had a second painting of Thomas's, *Sky Light*, hanging in their family living quarters (Gopnick 2009).

As with the public scrum over the "replacing" of Churchill's bust with that of King's, here too it is tempting to dismiss the public discussion about Thomas's painting as another in a series of drummed-up media controversies. Yet here, too, we find important resources for thinking through the visual politics of the Obama presidency, in particular regarding issues of race. It is our contention that the various critiques of Thomas's painting and, by extension, the Obamas, are more tightly intertwined than they might initially seem. When critics charged Thomas with "fraud," when they argued that the president was only pretending to be cultured and sophisticated, when they described the work of "Black artist" Thomas as at best a skillful copy and/or something a child could make, and when they suggested that Obama was more interested in featuring Black artists than in publicly displaying the work of honest, talented ones, they were tapping into a long history of cultural tension about art, imitation, and race. The Obamas appear to be working and reworking the canvas of White House art in ways that invite us to consider the ways that Black aesthetic expression tells an important part of the American story. However, these two controversies show that they repeatedly have come up against the power of deeply embedded cultural tensions. Our analysis of the discourse of the Alston bust and Thomas painting controversies reveals that three primary tensions emerged in the controversies: those of imitation, especially Black imitation; a debate over the proper place of Black art and artists; and presence. Taken together, these tensions have much to tell us about the complex role of Black aesthetic expression in Obama-era tellings of the U.S. national story.

Tension of Imitation

Questions of imitation dominate discourse about art. On the one hand, there is the colloquial sense that art should be wholly original and emerge from one's own imagination (Wilson 2003, 90). On the other hand, there is the recognition that there is no such thing as wholly original invention, because creative expression often involves modeling, emulating, or learning from work that has come before. In the rhetorical tradition, imitation is recognized as a generative, inventional resource that allows an individual to "take experience apart and put it together in new ways" (Corbett 1971, 250). As the "rhetorical notion of copying, aping, simulating, and emulating models," Corbett says, imitation was valued because it was not framed as distinct from invention but rather integral to it (1971, 243). Thus arose the belief "that an artist becomes great by imitating great artists" (Sullivan 1989, 7-8). Such notions of imitation challenge the colloquial belief in imitation as a "mere copy" or identical duplication of the original, yet the latter view also persists. As Wilson (2003) puts it, "In vernacular discourse, imitations are 'cheap copies,' and imitators are plagiarizers" (104).

We saw this tension between invention and imitation play out most explicitly in the controversy over the Alma Thomas painting. Michelle Malkin's flipped *Mona Lisa* constituted a critique of Thomas's reworking of Matisse as a mere copy or duplication with no inventional capacities of its own. Furthermore, bloggers' interest in side-by-side comparisons of the Thomas and Matisse works, which purportedly revealed the "plagiarism," functioned as an argument by visual analogy where the basic visual similarities of the two works were said to tell the whole story. By digitally reproducing the images such that they appeared to be the exact same size (in reality the Matisse work is nearly twice as large) and made of the same medium (in fact the Matisse is a *gouaches découpées*, or paper cutout, while Thomas's work was made with acrylic paint), critics created the impression that *Watusi (Hard Edge)* was nothing more than a nearly identical copy. Furthermore, while claims that imitation of the Matisse cut-outs fueled Thomas's development of a distinctive painting style were dismissed as mere art-historical justification for copying, largely missing from the conversation was acknowledgement that Matisse himself might have been imitating or borrowing from others who came before him. Such absence suggests a core relationship between imitation and authority as well: who has the authority to imitate and in what contexts?

Murphy (1997) points out that traditions provide inventional resources for claiming authority; art traditions are no different. Murphy states that authority may be derived "from a demonstrated familiarity with a cultural grammar and from the aesthetic ability to move effectively within that tradition" (1997, 76). Thus while Matisse is implicitly figured in the controversy's discourse as a White male master whose works are wholly original, the Black female painter Alma Thomas is figured as a plagiarist, one who would never be recognized for an "aesthetic ability to move effectively" within the traditions of abstract Western art. Turning briefly to Charles Alston as a counterpoint, we would argue that Charles Alston conversely *gains* access to artistic authority in his representation of the King bust not in spite of, but because of, his creation of an imitation or a likeness. That is, he is seen as operating within a tradition of "Black art" (a tension we explore

further below). In 1970, for example, Alston was uniformly praised for his execution of the King "likeness," which was seen as a skillful imitation of the man himself; one letter writer to Alston wrote of seeing the bust, "I think you have caught him fully and magnificently into your head" (Harrington 1970). Thus, unlike Thomas, Alston's work was seen to constitute a skillful imitation or "likeness" of a figure of importance to the Black community. He was acknowledged as having authority and therefore access to invention in that context.

The Thomas controversy also animated questions about the agency of the artist as imitator. In this context, the race of the artist very much mattered. Kirt Wilson (2003) points out that in the U.S. context, imitation brings with it a fraught racial history. As a result, he cautions that discussions of Black imitation "should be contextualized within a specific racial history and discursive practice" (Wilson 2003, 105). Indeed, our study of the contemporary discourse about the Thomas painting reveals deep echoes with histories of Black imitation. Wilson points out that in the nineteenth century imitation became synonymous with citizenship, the idea being that modeling yourself after exemplary citizens would in turn help you become one of them (2003, 89). This process was particularly important for newly freed African Americans, who sought integration into the body politic. Frederick Douglass, for example, "advised African and European Americans to embrace imitation" of white norms because it would give them access to the public sphere (Wilson 2003, 89). Yet Wilson points out that "when African Americans imitated dominant cultural norms, adopting and extending the ideals of citizenship, they threatened White supremacy and the justifications for segregation and exclusion" (2003, 89). The fear of amalgamation—that Blacks might imitate Whites "too well" and therefore break down social and political divides between the races—drove a late-nineteenth century discourse that came to see Black imitation as proof of Black inferiority.

What arose was a cultural tradition of claiming or associating Blacks with imitation, what Wilson terms the "stereotype that people of color were gifted imitators" (2003, 96). This stereotype furthered arguments about the danger of Black imitation, of Black people as being "too skilled" at producing imitations. Such narratives echo in the Thomas controversy. If, as *Free Republic* put it in its post about the Thomas painting, audiences "failed to spot the copy hiding in plain sight," then Thomas was a skilled imitator whose art was dangerously misleading—as Wilson puts it, "a threat to white ideals" (2003, 97). Indeed, in the discourse Thomas was framed as an imitator apparently so skilled that even art historians, museum curators, and the president of the United States were fooled. Yet in the very same breath, and quite contradictorily, Thomas was also framed as an "inferior" artist who could do no better than to imitate the masters, and, in fact, made work that even a child could make. This latter argument has a racial history as well: Wilson explains that late nineteenth-century arguments about Black imitation elaborated that "African Americans not only were inferior, but they were also skilled at hiding their inferiority through imitation" (2003, 97). Ultimately, then, the Thomas controversy echoed long-held racial narratives that denigrated Black imitation as dangerous, labeled Black actors as childlike inferiors hiding that inferiority with their skill in imitation, and negated the positive values of imitation in the service of invention.

Tension of Presence

Another tension that emerged in the controversies—most substantively in the controversy over the King/Churchill busts—is what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) term *presence*. Presence emerged as a key theme of discussion in both controversies because it was assumed that what is valued is that which will be given presence: "By the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 116). Thus when the Obamas made choices about the public display of art and chose to "single out certain things for presentation," those choices drew "the attention of the audience to them and thereby gives them a *presence* that prevents them from being neglected" (Perelman 1982, 35, emphasis in original). The Obamas' call in early 2009 for work by "African-American, Asian, Hispanic, and female artists" to review for consideration and their statements that they wished to "to 'round out the collection' and 'give new voices' to modern American artists of all races and backgrounds" signaled the kinds of works that they hoped to make present in the public spaces of the White House (Chozick and Crow 2009, 30). Similarly, the president's choice to display the Alston bust of King in the Oval Office—a representation that less than 10 years earlier had marked the first image of an African American ever displayed publicly in the White House—signaled a valuing of work by and about Black Americans.

In the case of the King and Churchill busts, however, it is important to recognize that presence is not only associated with the art works themselves, but engaged in a relationship with those iconic figures the art works are meant to represent. Thus the busts must be seen as symbolic representations of the men themselves and, as a result, carriers of the values of those figures they represent. Obama, for example, has long described King as his personal hero. The presentation of the busts in the privileged space of the Oval Office makes these historical figures matter, giving them not only physical presence, but ideological presence as well: morality, civil rights, and nonviolence for King, and beliefs about the "special relationship" between the United States and Britain for Churchill. Perelman (1982) says that creating presence is especially important "when it is a question of evoking realities that are distant in time and space" (35). Thus the presence of sculpted representations of historical figures such as King, Lincoln, and Churchill evokes histories that those displaying the busts wish to reflect upon and value.

Yet presence is not always recognized as a positive, as we saw in the case of Alma Thomas's painting. In the hands of Obama's critics, presence was made negatively to function as a kind of "affirmative action for artists." What the Obamas framed as a desire to "give new voices" a public space in the White House, critics of Thomas's imitation rearticulated as a commentary on artistic quality. Recall blogger Ben Shapiro's (2009) claim that if Thomas were a "fraud" and "plagiarizer," then the only reason for Thomas's inclusion in the White House selections must have been because the Obamas were giving "special credit to black artists based on their race." Similarly, Ann Althouse's lamentation that the White House was engaging in "sentimental stretching to identify

African-American artists" repeats the criticism that the only reason Thomas is in the White House is because of a kind of mandated presence for Black artists.

Something similar may be at work in the repeated narrative of Obama's "removal" of Churchill's bust from the Oval Office. Despite repeated clarifications that the bust had been removed before Obama took office, and despite reporting indicating that it was in fact a bust of Lincoln, not King, that technically "replaced" (i.e., took over the physical location of) the Churchill bust in the Oval Office, news sources almost immediately and then endlessly repeated the narrative that King had been the one to oust Churchill from his spot. NBC titled its piece "See ya, Churchill" (Iovino 2009), and London's *Mail* (2010) titled its piece "Churchill out, Martin Luther King In," implying a kind of battle of the icons in which the Black man won out. Indeed, it is hard not to see in the controversy a leap to somehow punish King for his presence in an honored space. If King was added, news reports seemed to imply, then it must be the case that he was added at the expense of something—or someone—else. While arguments about Thomas's presence in the White House were more explicitly about race, it is hard not to see the same dynamic at work in the leap to identifying the King bust as the cause of Churchill's supposed ouster.

Indeed, the value of adding King to the Oval Office, celebrated in Tapper (2009)'s first report on the change, was quickly counterbalanced by Obama's critics, who skillfully used the rhetorical resource of presence to reframe the debate as one about the *absence* of Churchill. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) note that the strategy of presence can backfire, turning "attention in a direction leading away from what is of importance to the speaker" (118). Because presence makes apparent that which is valued, and because sculptures like those of King and Churchill are thought to reference the values of the iconic figures they represent, critics implied that the opposite must also be true: what is absent must indicate a lack of value or respect.

Thus critics of Obama did not merely note the absence of the Churchill bust, they made the *absence of Churchill* present through their discourse. The focus on presence thus shifted, public conversation then turned to the question of what was wrong with Obama, discussion of what the absent presence of Churchill might portend for the "special relationship" between Britain and the United States in the future, and even to wild speculation about the "causes" for Obama's apparent animosity toward the British. Glenn Beck's "Kenyan grandfather" theory, and Mitt Romney's campaign claims that he would "restore Anglo-Saxon understanding" to relations between the United States and Britain exploit the absent presence of Churchill in ways that falsely invest "the content of discourse with a sense of immediacy and importance" (Karon 1976, 97). Importantly, the very discourse that makes Churchill an absent presence also produces King as a present absence. That is, while in the narrative frame of the controversy King has supposedly "won" because he now occupies a privileged space in the Oval Office, efforts to make Churchill present by amplifying his absence cause King and the artist who created him to vanish almost entirely from the discussion. (The creator of the Churchill bust, Jacob Epstein, is mentioned a few times in British sources.) Thus the public discussion shifted almost immediately from what Alston's King bust added to the Obama White House to what it took away.

Placing Black Artists and Art

The final tension percolating in the discourse of both controversies is the question of how Black artists should focus their efforts. Throughout the twentieth century, the question of "how should considerations of racial solidarity affect the practices of cultural and individual artistic expression" emerged frequently in discussions of Black aesthetic practice (Taylor 2010, 11). As Eric Watts points out in his study of W. E. B. DuBois and the Harlem Renaissance, if one made art that sought "to transcend race and represent life's 'truest' beauty," then one was believed to have "little authority to speak on race" (2001, 182). By contrast, if one instead focused on Black life, subjects, and experience, then one risked being marginalized by an art world invested in modern, universal subjects. Watts says that during the Harlem Renaissance, "black speech was increasingly delivered through a mode of public expression that either rendered it 'inauthentic' (propagandistic) or bound some speakers to (pure artistic) practices that negated their *voices as black* intellectuals" (182, italics in text). At the heart of these enduring tensions within Black aesthetics are the artists themselves. Unpacking the ways Alston and Thomas experienced these perennial tensions helps us understand more deeply what was at stake in arguments about Black art and the White House.

The very disagreements over individual expression versus art and practice "for" Black communities were especially present when Alston and Thomas were burgeoning artists. Both Alston and Thomas emerged as artists directly as a result of the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, when Du Bois, Alain Locke, and others were arguing about the value of "Negro art" (Watts 2002). Both had middle-class upbringings, came of age at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, and were trained at strong academic institutions, including Columbia University (Foresta 1981; Wardlaw 2007). Neither Alston nor Thomas considered themselves to be a part of a "Black art" movement. Rather, they saw themselves as artists who were Black. Though Alston actively taught, mentored, and championed younger Black artists throughout his career (one of his students was Jacob Lawrence, who went on to his own distinguished art career [Wardlaw 2007]), and founded organizations that brought together African American artists, he rejected the idea that there was such a thing as "Black art" and resisted the inclusion of his own work in segregated shows (Alston 1968). Yet in his subject matter he unapologetically emphasized the experiences of Black people, families, and communities; his painting *Walking*, for example, was inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Smithsonian Institution 2013).

Although Thomas participated in showings of Black artists and was the first African American woman to have an exhibit at the Whitney Museum, her association with "Black art" was tenuous at best. Thomas made clear that her work was influenced more by African patterns and not by "black aesthetics" (Thomas 1998, 64). As a Black woman, however, she was aware that access to art and the art world was a privilege that few African Americans enjoyed. Even though Thomas did not label herself as a Black artist, she demanded a high level of excellence from the Black students in the inner-city art enrichment programs that she taught: "She refused to recognize any ceiling whatever to [B]lack potential, particularly when it came to art" (Foresta 1981, 12). Both Alston

and Thomas, then, could be said to have shared an approach to art that worked to navigate a middle space between the two extremes outlined above: neither wholly devoted to "art for art's sake" nor wholly focused on "Black art" alone, both artists sought to integrate the skill and subject matter of Black artists into the mainstream art world, instead of marginalizing them in a separate category that could not transcend race.

The controversies generated by the placement of work by Alston and Thomas in the White House illustrate the way tensions about Black art continue to play out today, as critics of Obama used race as a basis for either ignoring their work (in the case of Alston) or focusing on it (Thomas). As we discussed in the preceding section, any mention of Alston the artist is absent from the controversy. Unlike the invisibility of both Alston and the King bust, however, Thomas was made hypervisible when conservative media labeled her a "Black painter." Watts (2012) notes that for artists and literary figures in the Harlem Renaissance, transcending race through "sophistication and education [were seen] as infallible signs of a readiness for social equality with white folks" (122). By "calling out" her race, then, critics implied (and, indeed, sometimes flatly stated) that Thomas was not the equal of Matisse in skill or technique. Thomas's race also was underscored as the presumed reason for her selection for display in the White House. Thomas's race needed to be hypervisible because it played into prejudiced notions of the primitive and unskilled ability of Black artists. In fact, it highlighted the "problem" with Black imitation.

The media's connection of Thomas's race as a marker of her lack of proficiency, as well as the silence surrounding Alston's artistic aptitude, is further illustrated through the placement of their respective artworks. As we noted above, in 2000 King's bust was loaned to the Clinton White House for display in the library, marking the first time that an art object depicting an African American subject was put on public display in the main floor of the White House (James 2009). President Clinton stated at the time, "This will have a huge impact over the course of a few years, as these thousands upon thousands of children stream through here and form their impressions. It makes a statement about what's important in our history to us" (*New York Amsterdam News* 2000). In March of 2009, President Obama had the bust—still on extended loan from the Smithsonian—installed in the Oval Office, where it sits on a small wooden table between the fireplace and the door visitors use to enter and leave. Echoing the sentiment of President Clinton, the placement of King's bust in highly visible spaces permits it to be a part of the fabric of the American story. Despite the relative silent treatment of the media, the bust can be viewed by visitors touring the White House as well as those who peruse the Flickr and official White House photographs online. Its inclusion in highly trafficked spaces by international and domestic citizens promotes the contributions of Blacks within American society.

That is not the case with Alma Thomas's *Watusi*. Despite the uproar over the selection of *Watusi* as a supposedly fraudulent, ill-conceived, unoriginal work of "art," little attention was paid to *Sky Light*, the other painting by Thomas that was selected to hang in the first family's residential quarters. If it really were the case that Thomas lacked skill and was in essence (if not actuality) a racial concession by the White House to secure work by Black artists, one would expect calls for the removal of her other piece as well.

However, there were none. Given that the debate questioned Thomas's right to be acknowledged as a talented American artist at all, this is curious. Our best explanation is that the White House's public spaces hold more rhetorical power because of the authority and visibility that they offer. The private quarters, by contrast, are just that: private, family spaces that do not possess the epideictic power of the White House as the seat of executive power and a museum of the history of the presidency.

Talking about Art, Talking about Obama

The art controversies we have explained here did not merely serve as sites of symbolic struggle over the roles of imitation, presence, and Black art in contemporary U.S. culture. The tensions of imitation, presence, and Black art extended to Obama himself, as the discourse used conversations ostensibly about art to play out the question of how to define and place a Black president in the first year of his first term. The controversies explicitly performed the Right's ongoing interest in challenging Obama's authority, leadership, skill, and knowledge. The struggle over imitation, played out most explicitly in the public conversation about the Alma Thomas painting, took place largely in "gotcha" mode, as bloggers sought not only to reveal the dangerous news that Alma Thomas was a "plagiarizer," but more importantly to insinuate that President Obama himself either did not know, did not care, or, like Thomas herself, was complicit in the "fraud"; as one commenter at the *FreeRepublic* (2009) site put it, "An art fraud for a presidential fraud." Just as Obama's status and authority were questioned by those who violated decorum to shout "you lie" (as Representative Joe Wilson did during the president's health care speech to Congress that same fall) or by the many who continued to question his citizenship despite every piece of evidence they were offered, the Obamas' choice of White House art gave critics yet another symbolically charged way to criticize the president. For those "gotcha" critics who leapt at the chance to denigrate modern art and the work of a well-recognized Black female artist in the service of their politics, the racial politics of imitation served as a convenient and rhetorically powerful mode of displacement for their claims about Obama's presidential agency and authority.

The tensions of presence that emerged in both controversies also highlighted the new president's representational dilemmas in 2009. The choice to make the bust of King, and paintings by Thomas and others, visible gave them—and the diversity of expression they represented—presence. But, as we have seen, that presence also opened up space for the kinds of standard antiaffirmative action arguments that routinely appear in U.S. public discourse. In suggesting that the addition of a representation of a Black public figure necessarily entailed the loss of Churchill, and in the assumption that the only reason work by Alma Thomas was considered for display was because of the artist's race, critics of Obama implied that Obama himself was lacking these same things. In the controversy over the Churchill bust, presence became a powerful rhetorical resource for critics who sought to challenge Obama's understanding of the "special relationship" and foreign policy history. Discourse about presence in both controversies raised questions

about Obama's qualifications to be president and suggested that Obama had personal racial biases that would somehow cloud his ability to be an effective world leader.

Finally, the core tensions performed in conversations about Black art—the debate over the authority to define the direction of one's art and questions regarding the value of universal art versus a Black political aesthetic—are parallel to tensions that continually face Obama in his presidency. Obama is president for/of all, but there are those who want to position him as a president for Blacks only, or as a Black president who does not do enough for his community. Neither of these options enables him to transcend race, of course; as a result, he shares with Alston and Thomas that liminal space in which the choice to value universal expression runs up against an interest in promoting the interests of Black community. As the *New York Times'* Jodi Kantor (2012) wrote, "To blacks who accuse him of not being aggressive on race, Mr. Obama has a reply: 'I'm not the president of black America,' he has said. 'I'm the president of the United States of America.'" When Obama responds to challenges that he is not "Black enough" with the claim that he is not the president of Black America, the argument is not all that different from the ongoing challenges Alston and Thomas (and other Black artists) felt throughout their careers as they worked to make art for themselves and for all, while at the same time sharing deep ties with and investments in the communities in which they lived. Not able to extricate himself from this liminal space, Obama himself also seems to recognize its value as a place from which to speak. Regarding the role of Black art in the American story, Obama has argued that it plays both a distinctive and a central role. Echoing perhaps W. E. B. DuBois's contention that "we who are dark" have access to particular aesthetic experiences that others may not (Watts 2001, 190), Obama openly values Black history and expression for the ways that it speaks to "our Nation's enduring struggle to perfect itself" (Obama 2010).

If our study of these art controversies illustrates how the tensions of imitation, presence, and Black art constituted thinly disguised commentary on Obama himself, it also invites reflection on the politics of the presidency more broadly. Despite critiques that Obama does not "do race" as president, this analysis illustrates that presidential discourse about race (and raced discourse about presidents) takes many forms. As a result, it invites further attention to the ways that other visual rhetorics—and the deep cultural tensions they can perform—play out on this most visible of public screens.

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